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# THE MODERN CART OF THESPIIS.

BY W. H. CRANE.

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THESPIIS, the encyclopædias tell us, was born about 540 B. C., and is the earliest playwright mentioned in history. None of his works has descended to posterity, and probably posterity ought to be grateful. He was a Greek, and, if we may believe the scholarly opinion of Miss Clara Morris, who contributed a clever monograph on the drama to a popular magazine last autumn, the fewer we have of Greek plays the better. But the only relevancy of Thespis to the topic of this paper consists in this, that we actors are to this day universally styled Thespians, and that while the players of his dramas roamed over the country in carts, carrying their stage with them wherever they went, and were confined to a pretty peninsula jutting out from a lost corner of Europe, we Thespians of to day cover in our journeys an immense empire, thousands of miles in extent and inhabited by the most restlessly intellectual and critically exacting people on the face of the earth.

There are now in the United States between twenty-five and twenty-eight hundred theatres and opera houses, of which the great majority are open to date-engagements, extending over various periods of time, from one night to a week, and, in some cases, a series of weeks. Such theatres exist in New York City, notably the "Grand Opera House" and the "People's," on whose boards plays run one week each, and no more. But when we leave the large cities, we find that every theatre is open to dates, and that very few towns support stock companies which can satisfy audiences through a season of forty weeks. In fact, the stock-company theatres in the great city of New York can be numbered on the fingers of one hand; and in the other large cities of the United States they are hardly a factor in the composition of our dramatic entertainment. The American stage has become essen-

tially peripatetic, as much so as the petty stage that delighted the rustics of Bœotia or Attica who stood with gaping mouths and attent ears about the carts of Thespis.

This fact is a natural result of an evolution which could have been foretold by any one who had made a proper estimate of the American character at the time when the urban population of the United States began to take on its extraordinary growth. Political economists tell us that the ratio of town dwellers to farm dwellers in the United States has greatly changed during the last three or four decades, and is still changing, and in the same direction, so that, whereas it might have been at one time as one to seven, it is now more like three to seven. One-half of the inhabitants of the State of New York live in cities, or in towns that are ambitious to become cities. These urban communities cannot support well-drilled stock companies, but they crave the service of good actors and the production of the best plays of the period; and it is a necessary consequence of our social scheme that what is wanted by any community that is able to pay for the satisfaction of its wants is certain to arrive. The mountain cannot come to Mahomet, therefore Mahomet goes to the mountain. Chicago cannot go to Paris to shudder with, and at, Bernhardt, therefore Bernhardt goes to Chicago, and "Fedora" and "Camille" become as real in some edifice built on what was recently an Illinois prairie as on the stage of the Théâtre Français. This illustration serves for the entire phenomenon. We may say of the American people, as Juvenal said of the Greeks of the time of Nero, "The whole nation is a travelling actor." At all hours of the twenty-four, railway trains are carrying companies of actors from one town to another, and new bills are being posted for each one of twenty-five hundred theatres.

The stars of the modern American stage do not, indeed, "shoot madly from their spheres," but their orbits are as varied, as constant, and nearly as rapid, as those of the cometic stars that, from time to time, adorn the skies. For them there is neither fixity nor rest, except during the languorous days of summer among the mountains or on the seashore. From September to June they shoot hither and thither, not as Goethe sings, "without haste, yet without rest," but (in sober verity) with great and anxious haste, and with no thought of present rest.

The members of a company must be collected at stated times, which wait for no man and hardly for a leading lady; railway trains must be boarded on the minute, nor will conductors cause a "lightning express" to tarry even to suit the tardy convenience of a Booth or a Bernhardt. It is these exigencies and anxieties, we say to one another, that wear us out before our time; and yet somehow we do not, as a matter of fact, wear out much sooner than others of our fellow beings, and many of our excellent actors whose lives are passed upon the road are in sound health and activity well up into the sixties.

The make-up of the numerous theatrical companies that annually take the road is not in the slightest degree that "fortuitous concourse of atoms" to which certain materialistic philosophers are wise enough to attribute the composition of the Universe. Every large city has dramatic agencies, on whose books actors of both sexes are entered and classified. From June to September, while the artists rest, the agencies are busy in mapping out the routes for the coming season. If an inexperienced person with some money, less knowledge, and a vast ambition to reap a harvest of fame and United States currency, visits an agency, he finds himself in possession of an option on talent of all descriptions, tragic, comic, farcical, musical, emotional, saltatory,—in a profusion surpassing his wildest dreams.

When he is brought face to face with the possessors of these gifts, the prospective manager is delighted to find that he has at command absolutely the best representatives of the modern drama. The moment is a golden one; a fortunate combination of circumstances has placed in his grasp an opportunity which could not have been foreseen, and may never occur again. An unequalled leading juvenile, whose press-notices are spread before him in quantities sufficient to fill a Saratoga trunk, happens at this precise moment to be disengaged. His usual salary has been three hundred a week, but, in consideration of the esteem in which he holds the prospective manager, he is willing to contract with this gentleman for the season on the basis of one hundred, of which four weeks are to be paid in advance, and charged to the last month of the season. The most brilliant lady in America (see her press-notices); the most talented second lady; the wittiest soubrette (press-notices again); the most accomplished all-round versa-

tile (see press-notices as to his renditions, whether of *Bob Acres* or the heavy father in "*Hazel Kirke*"); all these, together with the customary component parts of such a company as is required to make the proposed route an unqualified and unprecedented success, are bubbling over with the same esteem for the new manager, the same willingness to accept scaled-down salaries, and to receive four weeks pay in advance. There are absolutely no limits to their genius, their enthusiasm, and to their well-founded expectations touching the drafts which they will enable their fortunate director to make on the purses of the expectant public.

The reader can foretell with tolerable accuracy the destinies of such undertakings, so managed. If they were to succeed, it would compel a revision of all current theories of probabilities and, perhaps, of possibilities. It is computed by experienced theatrical managers and speculators that about one-half of the travelling dramatic companies lose money during each season. More than one-half of these companies are conducted over their routes by practised managers, who have been in the business long enough to know what to do and what to avoid doing; what leaks to stop; what means to take of "working the press"; to bill towns in advance; to enlist the good words of prominent people;—yet some of these experienced men fail to make money. And we may therefore assert that every beginner who forms a company out of the material in the dramatic market and starts out on the road with it is sure to lose all that he invests. It is quite on the cards also that after he has lost all his money, he will continue to play the desperate game on credit, and wind up with the sheriff in the box office and the wardrobes of his company held for board. Such exhibitions of human folly occur every year in large number and with monotonous regularity, and each one has a humorous as well as a melancholy side. We are compelled to smile at the simplicity of the man who puts faith in rural press-clippings from which all unfavorable criticisms are carefully excluded, and in the self-laudations of artists out of a job; while we lament that the earnings of years in some obscure but useful employment should be dissipated in a few weeks devoted to a vain search for renown and money. A philosopher who neither laughs nor weeps, but who observes human affairs calmly, notices with satisfaction that the funds thus scattered are not wasted; they swell the revenues of useful railways and local hotels; and there are worse methods of

spending money than in lining the pockets of unapplauded actors, since these are not wholly depraved, and may come in time to praise themselves less, and to deserve that the public should praise them more.

Unsuccessful ventures imply that successful ventures exist, and they therefore are the results of imitation attempted with insufficient or unsuitable material. Their fatal no-logic consists in this, that, whereas good dramatic companies are well compensated, therefore bad ones will be. Thrown into the form of a syllogism, the argument would read as follows:

A. B., the manager of the celebrated star, Mr. Blank, cleared forty thousand dollars on the road last season with a trained company whose capacities were well known to him.—I propose to start out this season without a celebrated star, and with a company hastily put together, touching whose capacities I am experimentally ignorant. *Therefore*, I expect to clear forty thousand dollars.

The absurdity of this conclusion is so obvious that we are compelled to believe one of two things: either that the unlucky speculators do not reason over the matter at all; or that they proceed on the supposition that the inhabitants of our interior towns are so greedy for entertainment that they will readily accept whatever shows travelling managers choose to bring them. And perhaps the motive power behind all these dramatic failures is a combination of the stupidity and the false hypothesis which we have depicted.

“Against stupidity even the gods themselves fight in vain,” says the German poet, and if the gods give it up, we certainly must. But as to this hypothesis that the audiences of the American inland are not good judges of dramatic performances, we may be pardoned a few words that may not be wholly useless.

A thousand people, from the age of sixteen upwards, in an interior town, of the class that can afford good seats at the theatre, are, in the aggregate, better read in dramatic and general literature, and have more clearly defined theories of intellectual enjoyment, than a thousand people taken in mass from the parquette and balcony of a New York theatre on any given evening. This is assertion, but it is based on sound reason. People in the interior do not work so hard, they think more, they read more, they discuss current and literary topics more thoroughly. Life

with them is not a constant excitement ; not a round of excesses, both in pleasure and business, as the case is with the wealthier portions of the population of a metropolis. Magazine editors tell us that rural readers are not only the mainstay of these periodicals, but that they are the most critical and appreciative. People in great cities are too busy to criticise dramatic performances ; they go to the theatre to be amused, and their subsequent comments amount to nothing more than vague expressions of superficial opinion. The writers of the dramatic columns in the morning journals are paid to criticise plays and players, and it is easier to echo these practised scribes than to frame new theories.

Charles Dickens illustrates this condition in "Nicholas Nickleby." Nicholas, during his career as an actor, visits sundry citizens of Portsmouth in order to sell tickets for a benefit. One of the Portsmouth *bourgeoisie* buys tickets in order to encourage the Drama, of whose decadence he speaks in melancholy terms, just as many people do to-day, and earnestly begs the young actor to do all in his power to restore that veneration and regard for the "Unities of the Drama," whose welfare ought to be dear to all playgoers. Here is a rural shop-keeper who knew what the "Unities" are. If you were to take your note-book to-night and interview all the people in the parquette of "Palmer's," "Daly's," or the "Star," what sort of answers would you write down as to what the "Unities" are ? And yet whole folios have been written to enunciate the principle that adherence to the "Unities" is the first law of a symmetrical play.

All over the United States the people of the towns know what good acting is, and they know who the good actors are, and what the good plays of the period are, and they expect to get the good plays represented by the good actors, and staged and acted in the best manner, and nothing short of this triple combination will satisfy them. And when this combination is accomplished, there is no talk among the members of the company about attachments at the box-office or counting the railway ties on the journey home. Success is mapped out as an accomplished fact, as clearly as the proposed route ; and the manager may count with certitude on the expected profits of the season. This certitude obtains in the case of numerous companies whom it would be invidious to name, although we may say that in each of these cases the play is of distinguished merit and the star is famous. In

short, the interior public demands renowned stars in renowned plays.

The star-system has been much criticised and often condemned, but it is worth while to pause before we criticise and condemn established facts that are the product of natural evolution. Certainly, when we go to see and hear "*Hamlet*," we wish to have the exhibition as good as it is possible to make it. But whoever represents *Hamlet* to us with fidelity and genius is entitled to the name of a star. This designation is not one that is affixed at will to an artist; it attaches itself to him from the nature of the case; he is a star, therefore he is styled one.

That people should wish to see a distinguished artist in a play of undoubted merit and attractiveness, in the rendition of the principal character in which he has shown himself to be specially qualified, is perfectly natural and proper; and this wish is the basis of the success of the star-system, which is now so firmly incorporated with our dramatic destinies, that our great actors have come to look upon New York city as a mere incident in a season of forty weeks, and as entitled to receive its proportion of time relatively to the other towns of the United States,—say one-twentieth, and not much more.

The better-class audiences of the towns of the United States will not tolerate inferior plays by inferior actors; and those who believe that they will, and who act on that belief, will soon discover their mistake. Nor does it ever answer for the best companies to cut out vital portions of plays in order to shorten the hours, or to introduce gags, whether local or not. The path of safety and success lies in the direction of scrupulous respect to an approved text of the play, and an earnest endeavor all through the performance to do and say with the utmost care and artistic finish all that is to be done and said.

That the travelling-star system magnifies the personal qualities of the actor at the expense of the literary quality of the drama is an unfounded conclusion. Dramatic composition follows fashions, and those fashions are the product of their times. The Shakesperian drama is conspicuous by its illustrations of great passions, such as jealousy, in "*Othello*," and reckless ambition, as in "*Macbeth*;" and in no plays that have since been written has there been greater room for the display of genius in the prominent rôles, that is, for the star actor. In the drama of the Restoration and that of

the last century in England, when all good English acting was confined to the stock companies of London, and all provincial troupes were mere gangs of barn-stormers, the interest and plot depend upon the combination of character, not upon the relations of any single one to the rest. In the "School for Scandal" nearly every one of the characters is required to be impersonated by a fairly good artist, and the comedy goes off well even when none of the artists rises above that level. Such is not the fashion of the present day. In the great majority of the plays which command success throughout the United States, one conspicuously good, and therefore celebrated, artist is the pivotal figure; the drama centres in him or her, and the execution must be commensurate. What would be said of a fairly good *Camille*, a fairly good *Fedora*, a fairly good *Hamlet*? These are the *Camilles*, *Fedoras*, and *Hamlets* that fail; but a fairly good *Charles Surface* is not a failure, because, even if he "come tardy off," we still have left the glitter and blaze and wit of the other characters, the sophisms of *Joseph*, the baleful advocacies of *Mrs. Candor*, the sneers of the *Backbites*. But the "School for Scandal" is not a play to take on the road; nor is any play fit for this purpose if it has been originally constructed for a stock company.

We are not forecasting in this paper the future of our Drama, but we think we are safe in saying that stock companies will be during a long period (in the United States) the exception rather than the rule; that the best and most popular plays will be, like the works of Sardou, written with reference to star-acting of an emotional or humorous type, and of the highest attainable degree of excellence. In many of our American towns audiences may not become more critical and exacting, but the number of towns in which audiences shall be critical and exacting will during many years constantly increase. The system of travelling companies will become more solidified, and, in the true acceptation of the word, scientific; since science is only another term for the prevision of events, and the wise manager has it in his power to be in touch at all times with the dramatic taste and requirements of every town in the country, and to regulate his operations accordingly. By so doing, he elevates them from the grade of ventures to that of comparative certainties.

WILLIAM H. CRANE.